

Computerized writing aids make writing easier for persons with aphasia

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It is possible to improve writing skills for those with aphasia with the aid of computerised writing aids. This is the conclusion of a doctoral thesis from the Sahlgrenska Academy at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Aphasia affects the ability to understand and use spoken language, and the ability to read and write. Persons with aphasia were trained in the use of computerised writing aids in the study on which speech and language pathologist Ingrid Behrns' doctoral thesis is based. The subjects were aided by a computer-based spell-checker and a program for word prediction, similar to that used when writing SMS messages on mobile telephones.

The thesis shows that writing ability improved in several ways with the aid of these programs.

"A fairly high reading and writing ability is necessary in order to benefit from the most common spell-checkers. So we used two writing aids that have been specially developed for persons with dyslexia, instead. These programs were also useful for persons who have writing problems arising from aphasia", says Ingrid Behrns.

The programs are easy to use and cheap to purchase, and may be beneficial for many people who have aphasia. The greatest benefit for those who were members of the group receiving writing training was that it became easier to make corrections in what they had written. They also wrote longer sentences with fewer spelling errors.

"But is important to remember that time must be invested in learning how to use the computer programs. It was particularly encouraging to find that it is possible to improve writing ability even though several years have passed since the participants developed aphasia", says Ingrid Behrns.

Previous research into writing ability and aphasia has focussed on the spelling of single words, but the work presented in the thesis investigated not only the completed text but also revisions that were made when writing a story. This makes it possible to see the aspects of the writing process for which the writer has had to use most energy. The thesis also shows that persons with aphasia can write stories with high coherence and a good overall structure, despite their language difficulties. The results also show that it is sometimes easier for persons with aphasia to express themselves in writing rather than in spoken language.

"The good results from the writing training are very encouraging since the ability to express oneself in writing opens many possibilities for communication using the Internet", says Ingrid Behrns.

APHASIA: Aphasia is a collective term for language difficulties that can arise after a stroke, for example, or from head injuries such as may be suffered in a traffic accident. Older persons are affected more often than younger, but aphasia can affect persons of any age. A person with aphasia has difficulty understanding, speaking, reading and writing, while their intellectual abilities are not impaired in any way. Approximately 12,000 Swedes are affected by aphasia each year.

Source: University of Gothenburg

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